

The Grand Theater
113 South 12th Street
Baton Rouge
East Baton Rouge Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1128

HABS
LA,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. LA-1128

THE GRAND THEATER

Location: 133 South 12th Street, Baton Rouge,
Parish of East Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Present Owner: Dorothy Landry.

Present Use: Vacant.

Significance: The Grand Theater stands out as the only remaining black theater in the Baton Rouge area. Dating from the early 1890s, the Grand operated as a "Negro opera house and dance hall", and later as a movie theatre. Through the years, famous black entertainers performed there. The City is hoping to rehabilitate the Grand Theater by turning it into a jazz museum and entertainment center.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Circa 1891-1895. The lot was sold for \$233 in 1891. In 1895, the same property sold for \$1,125, "with buildings."
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description of property: "A certain lot or parcel of ground, together with all of the buildings and improvements thereon, situated in that part of the city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, known as Lorente Town in the square bounded by North Boulevard, Liberty, America, and Champagne Streets, being designated as Lot No. Sixteen (16) of Square No. One (1), measuring sixty-four (64) feet front on Liberty Street, by a depth of One Hundred Sixty Five and One-Quarter ($165\frac{1}{4}$) feet between parallel lines." (Liberty became South 12th and Champagne became South 13th in 1929)

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Conveyance Book 14, Folio 405, August 27,
1891

Robert Hart to N. King Knox
The above property, \$233.

Conveyance Book 18, Folio 206, January 18,
1895

N. King Knox to Oscar Kindirt.
Lot "with buildings", \$1125.

Conveyance Book 18, Folio 207, January 18,
1895

Oscar Kindirt to Thomas
Washington The above property,
\$1350.

Conveyance Book 36, Folio 253, April 24,
1906

Thomas Washington to Isidore
Bernard. The above property,
\$1,500.

Conveyance Book 47, Folio 27, April 27,
1911

Succession of Isidore Bernard to
Henry J. Allan. The above
property, \$2,205.

Conveyance Book 51, Folio 264, April 26,
1913

Henry J. Allan to Eli S.
Moorman. The above property, no
dollar amount.

Conveyance Book 173, Folio 271, June 28,
1927

Eli S. Moorman to The Istrouma
Amusement Co, Inc. The above
property, \$36,000.

Conveyance Book 207, Folio 432, February
20, 1928

Istrouma Amusement Co., Inc. in
liquidation to John H. Moorman.
The above property and two other
properties, \$33,000.

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Number 26,855 Probate, April 26, 1972,
Succession of John H. Moorman to Dorothy
Landry. The above property.

4. Original plan and construction: On the 1908 Sanborn Insurance Map, the building labeled "Negro Opera House, Dance Hall and Skating Rink," had a one-story marquee extending over the street. The second floor was occupied by the "Lodge Room."

Judging from the existing front elevation of the building, the theater was grand. Two rounded arches between three pilasters formed the entrance to the theater. The ground floor, to the top of the arches, was scored to resemble stone, while the rest of the building was stuccoed in an imbricated pattern. The two-story pilasters supported a projecting cornice with modillions and rosettes. The third floor had four, more heavily proportioned pilasters with rosettes above. The building is crowned by a cornice and balustrade which at one time encircled a roof garden. The exterior stairway on the southwest corner that led to the roof garden is now gone.

5. Alterations and Additions:

In the 1930s, the Grand was converted to a movie theatre, although live entertainment was still scheduled occasionally. During the Depression and in the 1940s the theater was closed intermittently. In the 1950s, the building was altered considerably when it was converted to a night club and motel. In 1969, a fire badly damaged the second floor. Since that time, the building has suffered from neglect.

- B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Located in an interracial neighborhood of Chinese, Blacks and Italians, the Grand catered primarily to the blacks. In the 1920s and 1930s, vaudeville acts such as Sugar Foot Sam and entertainers Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, and Duke Ellington appeared there. After converting to a movie house in the 1930s, the Grand once again became a live entertainment club focusing on rock-and-roll. Currently, local advocates are trying to secure funds for a study to determine the feasibility of converting the Grand into a Jazz and Blues museum and entertainment center.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Conveyance Records, City of Baton Rouge, Centroplex.

Interview with Red Thompson (lessee of building), Clerk of the Court Office, Centroplex, August 1978.

Interview with Victor Knebels, custodian of the Grand Theater and lifelong resident of the area, August 1978.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Baton Rouge Morning Advocate, April 28, 1978, p. 31.

Baton Rouge State Times, April 27, 1978, p. 14A.

Sanborn Maps, Sanborn Map Co., N.Y., 1908 and 1923

Prepared by Sybil McCormac Groff
Project Supervisor
Historic American
Buildings Survey
Summer, 1978

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Grand represents the Renaissance Revival Style with its rusticated ground floor, arches, rosettes and crowning balustrade.
2. Condition: Generally, the structure is in poor condition. While the exterior is fairly sound, the interior is a shambles.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The rectangular theatre is two bays wide and three stories tall.
2. Foundation: Concrete.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: The walls are built from concrete with a brick infill, and then stuccoed and painted beige and white.
4. Chimneys: Removed.
5. Porches, stoops: An exterior staircase on the south elevation leads to the third floor. This was probably added in the 1950s when the Grand was converted to a motel.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doors and doorways: The main entrances (west) are located in the two large arches. Wooden infill surrounds the wooden doors in the arches. The only other door that has not been filled in with concrete is at the top of the stairs on the south facade.
 - b. Windows: All of the windows have scored concrete lintels with keystones and plain concrete sills.

The keystones on the front elevation have stuccoed leaf decorations. Most of the windows on the first and second floor have been filled in with concrete. The third floor has modern windows, most of which have been shattered.

7. Roof: The roof is flat, covered with black asphalt, and surrounded by a balustrade with plain square balusters and handrail. At one time a roof garden occupied the roof space of the building. The only reminders are the balustrade, handrail and light stand.

C. Description of Interior:

Due to extensive alterations, fire, and neglect, very little of the original interior remains. Modern partitioning now occupies approximately one-third of the theater space. Beyond this, to the east, the floor joists are exposed. The curving concrete brackets on the proscenium arch are still there. The second floor, which originally held the mezzanine, was converted to hotel rooms in the 1950s but, because of fire and abuse, it is difficult to discern any plan.

It appears that the wooden stairs to the third floor on the south side are original. At one time the third floor served as headquarters for a fraternal order. The original room plan remains fairly unaltered. Some beaded ceiling boards and horizontal beaded boards in the rooms are still extant.

Prepared by Sibyl McCormac Groff
Project Supervisor
Historic American
Buildings Survey
August, 1978

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was jointly sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the City of Baton Rouge, Parish of East Baton Rouge, Department of Public Works, Division of Community Development. Under the auspices of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth Anderson, Principal Architect, the project was completed in the summer of 1978 at the HABS field office, Department of Architecture, Louisiana State University. The team was comprised of Sibyl McCormac Groff (Columbia University), project supervisor/historian; Timothy Allanbrook (Rhode Island School of Design), project foreman; architect Kate Johns (Arizona State University); and student architects William J. Graham (University of Maryland), Robert D. Louton (University of Arkansas), and George W. Steinrock, Jr. (University of Detroit).